# SELF-DIRECTED
# LEARNING
## AT SUMMIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

summit
public schools

FSG
REIMAGINING SOCIAL CHANGE

# ABOUT THIS PAPER

This is the third paper that FSG and Summit Public Schools have written together. In 2011-2012, FSG worked with support from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation to write a series of in-depth case studies (http://ow.ly/A2RIl) on leading blended learning practitioners across the country, including Summit's blended learning math pilot at Summit San Jose. In 2012-2013 FSG authored a follow-up case study (http://ow.ly/A2RFL) on Summit's approach to innovation and rapid cycles of improvement. Both papers offer useful context on Summit's whole-school model, and how it has evolved to increasingly promote self-directed learning.

# AUTHORS

## Matt Wilka
Associate Director, FSG
matthew.wilka@fsg.org

## Jeff Cohen
Director, FSG
jeff.cohen@fsg.org

FSG is a nonprofit consulting firm specializing in strategy, evaluation, and research. Learn more at www.fsg.org

*All statements and conclusions, unless specifically attributed to another source, are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the other organizations or references noted in this report.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

*For videos related to this case study, please visit www.fsg.org/selfdirectedlearning*

# SELF-DIRECTED
# LEARNING
## AT SUMMIT PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In a large, brightly lit room at the Summit Public Schools' Denali campus, a lanky 12-year-old leans forward and stares at the math problem on his computer screen. Julio shifts in his chair, grimaces, then clicks the answer. It's wrong.

He leans back as the score for the unit's content assessment flashes up on the screen and he grimaces again – six out of ten; it's the third day in a row he's taken the content assessment for complex fractions, and Julio just can't seem to pass. He glances around the room. His friend Jason is working on History. He could ask Jocelyn for help, but she's still a unit or two behind in math. He looks at the ceiling, the walls, the red and green chairs and groups of his classmates working on laptops around the room. "Julio?" He turns. It's Mr. Johnson. Time for mentor check in. Julio walks over, and slouches down across from Mr. Johnson at a small table in the center of the classroom. He frowns.

Brian Johnson looks at Julio. He likes him. Julio's a sharp kid, good at math and ahead of most of the class, but when he misses something he tends to get stuck and doesn't like to work it through. They'll need to talk about that. But first, Brian asks Julio about his sister – she's been sick and he knows it's on Julio's mind. She's about the same, maybe a little better, and the two of them chat for a few minutes about her health,

Julio's family, and his plans for the weekend. Then Mr. Johnson moves to math. He knows from looking at the student data dashboard on his laptop that Julio has failed the complex fractions assessment yet again, and he can feel Julio's frustration. What went wrong? he asks. Was there a pattern to the problems that you missed? Julio shrugs – he's not sure, maybe word problems but hard to tell. Brian thinks for a minute. He knows he could look at the questions and just *tell* Julio the concepts he's getting wrong. Yet he also knows that learning to persist through these types of challenges will serve Julio well not just in math class, but in college and beyond.

Brian changes tack, and asks Julio to pull up his online Personalized Learning Plan, or PLP. He notes the concepts Julio has mastered in math, and asks him if he's set any goals for what to do next. Julio says that he wants to pass the complex fractions assessment, so Brian asks Julio what he'll do differently this time around – given that he's failed three in a row. Julio ponders a minute, looks up at Mr. Johnson, then replies

that he just needs to take more time. He'll wait till the next week to try the next assessment, and in the meantime he'll work on an online playlist with lots of videos and exercises about fractions. Mr. Johnson nods. The two talk for a few more minutes, then Julio walks back to his chair, thinking about what to do next. To figure out the assessment by Wednesday he'll need to do the playlist, and he also knows that Ms. Swegle, a math teacher, is holding a workshop on understanding math word problems next Monday that he can go to. Finally, he had promised Mr. Johnson that he'd ask for help if he got stuck. When Julio gets back to his chair, he feels like he *knows what he needs to learn*. He sits a little straighter, logs his new goals and strategies into his PLP, and dives in.

# SUMMIT'S JOURNEY
## TO SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

Julio's experience of deciding what he needs to learn, planning how to get there, and then following through is at the heart of self-directed learning at Summit Public Schools.

For Summit, self-direction results from years of careful planning. It is also an evolving response to the national challenge of how to best prepare students for college and careers. Self-directed learning at Summit does not mean that students can do whatever they want, or work exclusively by themselves. Instead, it entails a careful set of supports from every adult in the building mixed with a willingness to let go so that students can own their learning themselves.

Summit's journey toward self-directed learning starts from its mission to prepare a heterogeneous student population for success in four year college and to be thoughtful, contributing members of society. Since 2003, as Summit has grown from one to seven schools serving 2,000 students in the Bay Area, the network has earned considerable acclaim for its high school graduation rates. Yet in 2010, as Summit's leaders checked in with their graduates, they realized that just over half were on track to complete college in six years. While these persistence rates topped national averages, they fell well short of Summit's mission. Digging deeper,

Summit's leaders found two common threads among students who were not on track – they were struggling with college level math, and felt like they lacked the skills to navigate the unstructured realm of college.

Summit tackled the math problem first. In 2011-12, two schools in Summit's network piloted an intensive, blended learning math program in partnership with Khan Academy. Students spent part of math classes working independently on basic content, and part of their time learning deeper skills through projects with teachers. Math scores from the pilot year showed promise, and teachers also noticed an intriguing change in students' attitudes toward school. Students liked the immediate feedback of online data that Khan Academy provided, and began progressing faster through the exercises. They were more engaged in their work than teachers had ever seen before. Summit came to believe that blended learning held the promise to not just improve math scores, but to unlock students' ability to own their own learning and succeed independently – just like they would have to do in college.

To set their students up to succeed independently, the two Summit schools spent the 2012-13 year exploring a student-centered approach to blended learning. They soon realized that giving students greater agency was not about a single program or facet of their model, but had to be a radical design principle for everything the school did. To make this new school model possible, Summit knocked down walls to create a 7,000 square-foot open facility that gave them flexibility to explore new learning configurations. Students spent part of each day learning independently online, and part of the day on small group projects. Teachers facilitated project work and tutored students who needed extra help. Most importantly, Summit used weekly cycles of student feedback and performance data to constantly improve the new components that were put in place.

By the end of year two, Summit had landed on the basic structures of the self-directed, blended learning model that they wanted for their students, and all six Summit schools signed up to implement it in year three. Yet as Summit built out technology systems and fine-tuned its school model over the summer of 2013, they knew the hard work had just begun. While the core structures of self-directed learning were in place, it would take dramatic shifts in behavior by both students and adults to make the model succeed. *Students* would be asked to take responsibility for their learning; *teachers* would focus on instilling cognitive and noncognitive skills; *parents* would need to support their children in a new learning environment; and *administrators* would be asked to manage greater complexity and still deliver results.

One year later, looking back on the 2013-14 school year, the best way to understand Summit's self-directed learning model is to understand the experiences of each of these stakeholders within it.

Students, teachers, parents, and administrators have each exercised a new set of skills and dispositions in response to Summit's vision of self-directed learning. These new behaviors are rooted in Summit's history of operating schools, but also challenge traditional conceptions of what school should look like and achieve.

Together, these experiences show both the promise and the challenges of self-directed learning at Summit, and provide a blueprint from which other educators around the country can learn.

# WHAT DOES SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING AT SUMMIT MEAN FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE?
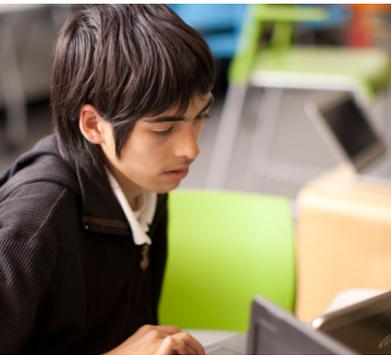
## STUDENTS

- Take responsibility for when and how they learn content
- Set learning goals and make plans for how to get there
- Display metacognition of knowing how they learn

## TEACHERS

- Teach skills more than content
- Become coaches, mentors, and facilitators rather than just experts
- Learn to let go...to let students go further

## PARENTS

- Learn how self-direction is different from traditional approaches to school
- Communicate with the school what is working and not working
- Support their children at home in new ways

## ADMINISTRATORS

- Create the environment and supports for self-direction
- Don't panic when challenges arise
- Maintain and drive vision amidst complexity and change

# STUDENT
# EXPERIENCE
## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

# STUDENT EXPERIENCE
## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

From the first day of the school year, Summit students are asked to drive their own learning. Some will find this intuitive; others will need more supports to help them along the way.

But for all students, the basic building blocks of self-directed learning – from setting a goal to making a plan to showing what you know to reflecting on where to go next – mirror the set of skills needed to learn autonomously in college and beyond. For students at Summit, developing these skills of self-direction occurs through a series of learning experiences that are markedly different from those at a traditional school.

### Personalized Learning Time

In a typical week at Summit, students experience two main types of learning: Personalized Learning Time and Project Time. Personalized Learning Time, or PLT, is all about content. For eight hours a week, students in PLT cluster across a large room, headphones on, and open up their laptops. Each student logs in to their Personalized Learning Plan (PLP). For each course they take, they see a sequence of colored boxes representing every content standard, or "focus area," that they will need to learn for the entire year. When a student clicks on a focus area, they are taken to a playlist that breaks down specific objectives and provides an array of exercises, videos, and progress checks tailored to the content area. Students spend as long as they need working through this content When they feel ready, they click an on-demand "content assessment" at the end of each playlist. A teacher approves the assessment, and if the student gets an 8/10 they "pass," that box turns green, and they move on to the next focus area.

The Personalized Learning Plan, with its series of green and red boxes, is like a roadmap for what to learn throughout the year, which students will have to navigate. Some prefer to work sequentially through focus areas while others move around. Students inevitably progress at different speeds – a few students even finish all the content for a given course and move on to the next one. And within each playlist, students learn differently as well. While many students find interactive practice problems the most engaging, some prefer to learn through videos, or others like detailed descriptive text. For Summit students, each of these learning choices they make
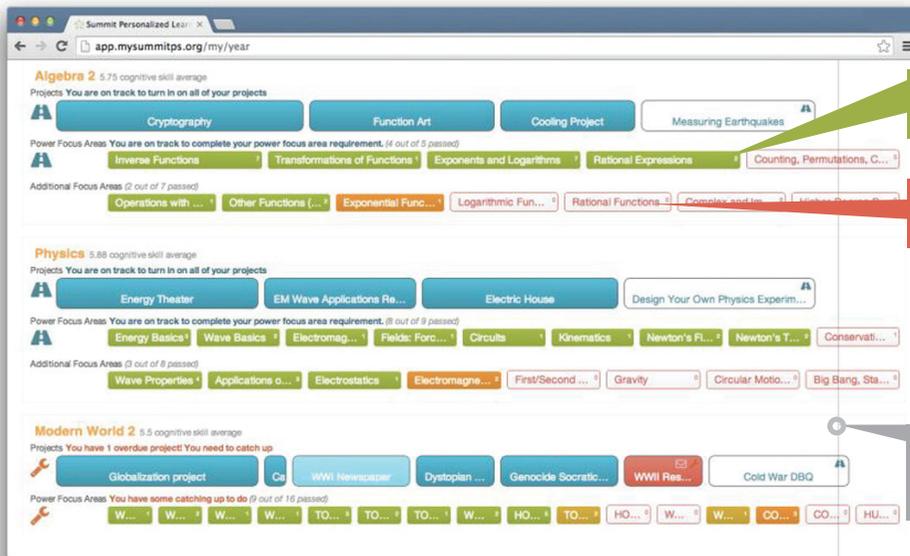
Green boxes mark focus areas that students have mastered

Red and white boxes indicate what they still have to do

A thin vertical line tells students if they are "on track" for a course.

– about which topics to tackle, what resources to pursue, and when to take assessments – builds an awareness of *how* to learn along with the *skills* to learn better in the future.

## Project Time

Personalized Learning Time, with its competency-based focus on content, is just one piece of self-directed learning. Students then spend twenty hours each week in Project Time, where teachers facilitate deeper learning activities designed to develop cognitive skills. Projects span a few weeks to a few months, with topics ranging from a joint English-Chemistry project on the merits of nuclear technology, to designing physics experiments, to creating mathematical models on the costs and benefits of college. Students use their online Personalized Learning  Plans to track their progress through a given project, and to access a set of playlists with the underlying content knowledge needed to complete that project successfully. At the end of a project, students must demonstrate what they've learned through written, oral, or multimedia performance tasks. Teachers coach students along the way, and assess each performance task using a cognitive skills rubric for skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, synthesis, and communication.

Effective projects give students an opportunity to apply the habits of self-directed learning to complex challenges and in heterogeneous group settings. By using Personalized Learning Time for content, and concentrating teacher time so intently on cognitive skills, Summit inverts the traditional, content-first approach to schooling. The continual reinforcemnt of cognitive skills also helps students be much more aware of their own strengths and challenges as learners – abilities that they will apply both to Personalized Learning Time and well after they graduate from Summit.

## Mentors & Noncognitive Skills

Beyond Personalized Learning Time and Project Time, Summit students experience several other modes of learning, including real-world "Expeditions," "Community Time" with small groups of adults and peers, "Summit Reads" to hone literacy skills, and PE. But for self-directed learning, no time is more important than the 10 minutes that each student spends every week with their mentor. Mentors at Summit are teachers, trusted confidants, and coaches in the process of learning how to learn. Mentor conversations often start on a personal note, but center on student goal setting and reflection on their growth as self-directed learners. By doing so, mentor conversations at Summit encourage the noncognitive skills that students will need to thrive in college. Five skills in particular – challenge-seeking, persistence, strategy shifting, appropriate help-seeking, and response to setbacks – make up the "behaviors of self-directed learning"[1] that Summit seeks to instill in its students. In addition to mentor time, Summit holds teacher-led seminars for students on these five behaviors and teachers reinforce them regularly in their classrooms.

## The Challenge of Getting Started

On the first day of the 2013-14 school year, Summit students walked into a school that was different from any they had experienced before. Rather than going to lectures or waiting for teachers to tell them what to do, students were suddenly in charge of mastering a year of content, at their own pace, while developing a long list of cognitive and noncognitive skills.

# FIVE
## BEHAVIORS OF
## SELF-DIRECTED
# LEARNING

1 : **Challenge** Seeking

2 : **Persistence**

3 : **Strategy** Shifting

4 : Appropriate **Help-Seeking**

5 : **Response** to Setbacks

[1] These behaviors draw on the work of David Yeager

For some students, it was the school experience that they'd been waiting for. They flew through exercises and content knowledge, and a few went on to subsequent courses. Yet for other students, self-directed learning felt more than just new – it was diametrically opposed to everything they'd come to expect from school. While Summit had held orientations to self-directed learning and anticipated some of the challenges students would face, they underestimated the degree of model shock this group of students would experience.

## Moving Forward

Over the ensuing months Summit would chip away, bit by bit, at the pattern of behaviors students held from their past experiences of school. In their place, Summit familiarized students with the process of self-directed learning. Initially, students struggled with setting goals, often setting them too high or too low. After

**fly** — Some students will fly — self-directed learning is the school experience that they've been waiting for

**succeed** — Most students will succeed with coaching — it may take some time to build the behaviors of self-directed learning

**struggle** — Some students will struggle — these students wil need additional support and targeted interventions

intensive work with mentors and workshops on behaviors of self-directed learning, student goal-setting began to improve. Still, once goals were set, students struggled with knowing how to productively take the first step. In response, Summit focused on how to map backwards from goals and break steps into achievable chunks. This ability, too, gradually improved with time and practice. By the second semester, Summit students' pace of learning started to increase. More and more students were setting goals and passing content assessments, and with peer effects combined with adult reinforcement, self-directed learning began to gather steam.

By the time that 2013-14 drew to a close, students at Summit exhibited substantially different learning behaviors than they had at the beginning of the year. Many students had developed personal systems for working through playlists. Others would get genuinely excited about a passing grade and the knowledge that they'd mastered a piece of content. Teachers noted that more and more students, upon failing a content assessment, would step back and make a careful plan for how to get it right the next time. This was borne out in data as well. At the beginning of the year, students who failed content assessments would often take them over and over again in rapid succession, failing each time. But by the spring, Summit's data showed a decrease in the number of attempts to pass content assessments, and also a much longer interval of time between the taking and retaking, during which students would look at their playlists, speak to peers, seek help from teachers and mentors, and understand what they needed to improve. These shifts, in Summit's view, are signs that they've ended the year on the right note, and are on a good path for self-directed learning in the next school year.
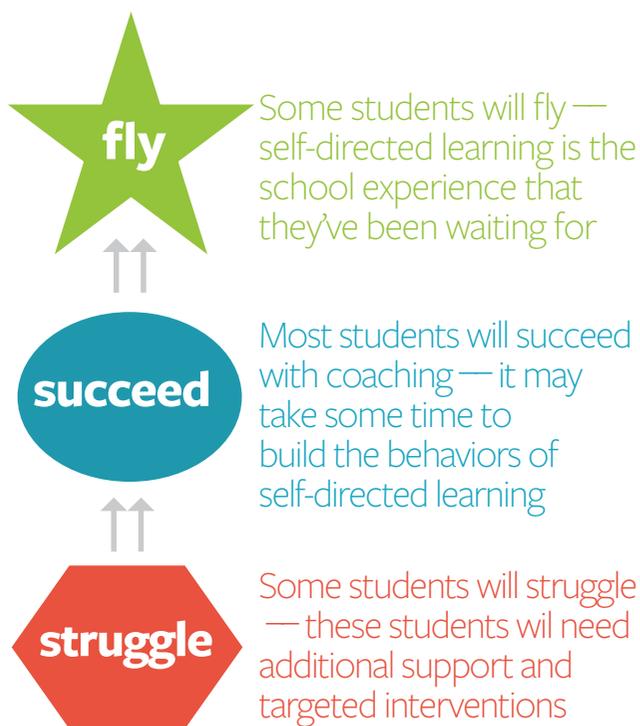
# Middle School vs. High School

By and large, students in Summit's middle school have had an easier transition to self-directed learning than students in high school. The reason, Summit believes, is that 6th graders have fewer learned behaviors from their histories of school. High schoolers more readily set goals, but the younger students have more of a "growth mindset" and openness to a changing model.

# The Role of Technology in Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is a long-held ideal in education. Models such as Montessori or Waldorf have even based their philosophies on enabling students to learn and explore for themselves. But these models have proven hard to replicate with typical public funding. Technology, when thoughtfully employed, provides a new set of tools for unlocking self-direction for a broader spectrum of schools. At Summit, technology aids everything from the delivery of content and assessments, to the analysis of student data, to the communication of student progress to teachers, parents, and students themselves.

Technology supports self-directed learning by:

✔ **Helping each student find the right resources at the right times to personalize their learning progression.**

✔ **Giving students agency to access content and assessments whenever they feel ready.**

✔ **Creating immediacy thanks to instant feedback on playlists and assessments.**

✔ **Promoting engagement among students who better understand their own learning.**

✔ **Providing accessible data on how each student is progressing to students, families, teachers, & administrators.**

Summit's current self-directed model would be impossible without technology. Yet faculty are quick to note its limits. Technology can quickly tell a student *what* they got right or wrong, but understanding *why* is a more complex process, grounded in inquiry and relationships with teachers and peers.

# TEACHER
# EXPERIENCE
## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

# TEACHER EXPERIENCE
## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

In order for students to assume a more central role in their own education, adults in the building must create the space for them to do so.

For teachers, this means stepping back from their traditional role as experts in delivering content-based instruction. Instead, teachers at Summit act as coaches and guides to help students navigate their own learning. This role shift does not diminish the value of great teachers to Summit's success; in fact, Summit believes that the principle of self-directed learning can help guide teachers to use their time in even more rewarding ways.

### Skills + Content

In Summit's self-directed learning model, the most valuable use of teacher time is to facilitate excellent project-based learning. To do this effectively, Summit has encouraged its teachers to focus more heavily on developing cognitive skills than on teaching basic content. Rather than being a content teacher in history or math who also develops skills, for instance, teachers at Summit become skills teachers who use content to contextualize the skills their students learn. This means instilling cognitive skills such as synthesis and interpretation through projects, and also giving workshops on noncognitive skills such as persistence.

The shift in emphasis from content to skills has been bittersweet for Summit teachers. Beyond the technical shift in role, part of a teacher's professional identity often revolves around the content they know. Some teachers at Summit report a tinge of sorrow in giving up this expertise. For other teachers of intrinsically content-heavy courses – for example, AP Calculus – there are natural constraints on how much of a skills focus they can adopt. And yet, like teachers everywhere, teachers at Summit can each tell stories about students who excelled in high school but floundered in college for lack of cognitive and noncognitive skills. As Summit's self-directed model has progressed, more and more teachers have come to believe that students are learning faster than ever before and are better equipped for the future, thanks in large part to their deeper learning skills.

### Data-Driven Coaching and Mentoring

As teachers shifted to skills-based instruction, they began to spend more and more time as facilitators and coaches of student learning. This occurs to some degree in Project Time when teachers coach students on cognitive skills, but

it is most pronounced during weekly, 10-minute mentor check-ins. While Summit has always had a mentor program, mentorship has taken on new dimensions in a self-directed learning context. Thanks to the technology of the blended learning environment, mentors have at their fingertips data on exactly how each of their 25 students is progressing on both content and cognitive skills. By meeting weekly and having discussions based on this data, mentorship has also become a way to intervene early, in small ways, before students ever enter crisis mode. But most importantly, mentor conversations are opportunities for teachers to reflect with students on their academic progress along with self-directed learning behaviors.

From an outside perspective, mentor conversations sound a lot like coaching discussions in some professional workplace environments. They are open-ended and Socratic. Teachers continually guide students to draw their own conclusions about what they need to learn, what goals to set, and what steps to take to get there. At Summit, good mentors see patterns across how students learn in different areas, and so become a focal point for communication with parents, for collaboration across teacher teams, and for feedback that needs to be delivered to students.

## Letting Go to Go Further

All teachers face daily decisions about when to support students and when to let go, but this balance becomes particularly acute in self-directed learning. For teachers at Summit, giving students additional space to learn and

sometimes struggle for themselves has been among the biggest shifts of the school year. In Personalized Learning Time, for example, when a student fails one, two, or even three weeks of content assessments in a row, sometimes they actually need that micro-experience of failure to help build their skills of resiliency and persistence in the face of challenges. For Summit, this contrasts how students traditionally experience failure in school. In other schools or even in past years of Summit's own model, students might be promoted based on seat time over mastery or insulated from small failures with intensive levels of supports. But this emphasis on avoiding failure at all costs rather than learning and recovering from it can inadvertently set students up for bigger failures later on in life – most often in failing to persist and graduate from college.

For teachers, guiding students to direct their own learning means recognizing when productive struggles and controlled experiences of failure can actually be beneficial. At the same time, interventions are essential. Not passing a few content assessments might lead to a coaching conversation, but when a student fails five assessments in a row a different approach is needed. Over time, Summit's teachers have learned to recognize when a student is struggling too much with self-direction, and tailor personalized support plans accordingly. Like the shift from content to skills, this calibration of support requires new muscles on the part of teachers – one of the reasons that Summit's first-year teachers have been just as successful (and sometimes more so) than their more experienced colleagues in teaching in a self-directed setting.

# PARENT
## EXPERIENCE
### OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING
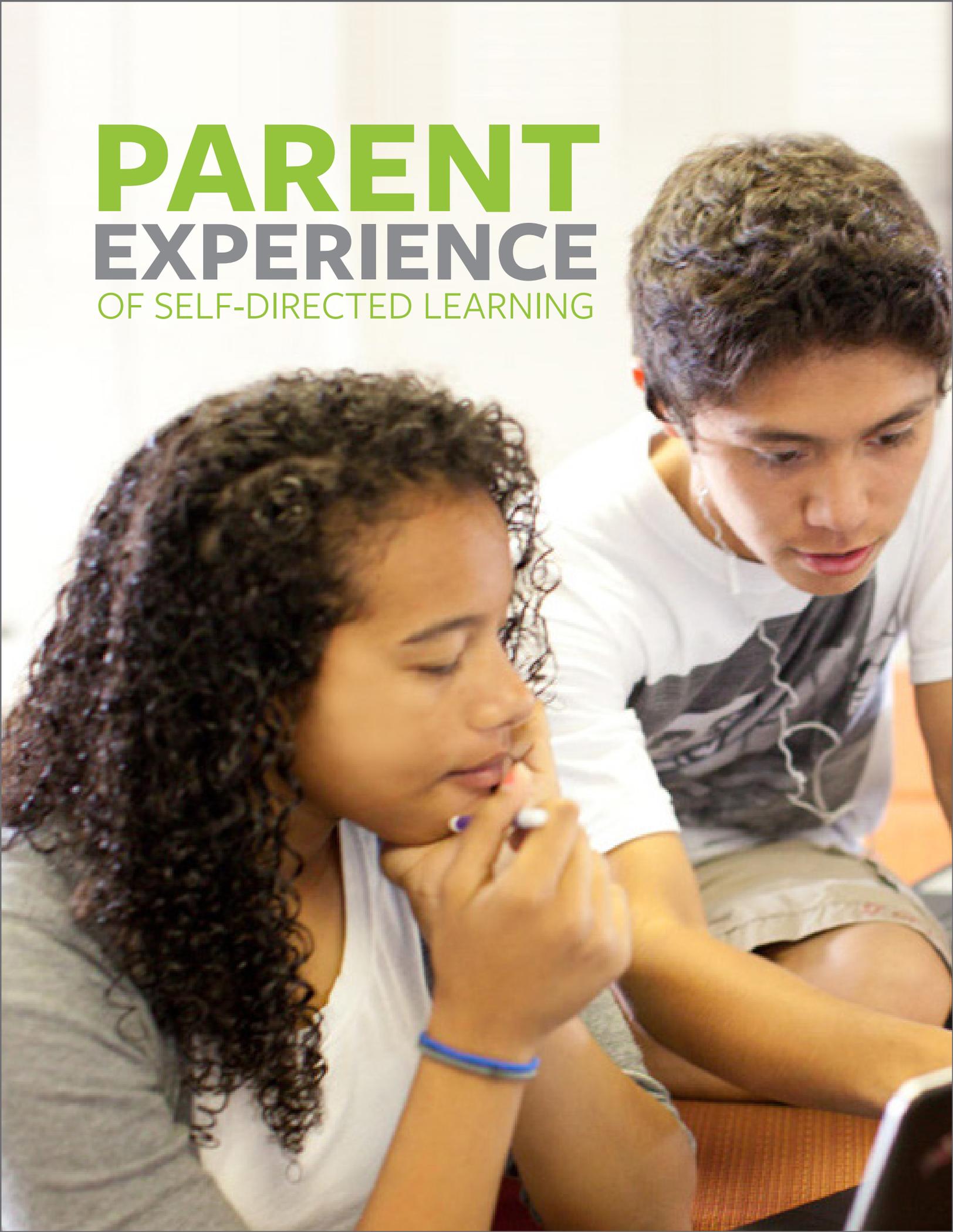
# PARENT
# EXPERIENCE
## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

For many parents, Summit's self-directed learning model looks quite different from their personal experiences with school.

As parents prepare to send children off to college, they invariably worry about how they will fare in a new environment. Parents may not use the language of "noncognitive skills" to describe their child's ability to persist, seek challenges, or ask for help, yet these skills are often on parents' minds. This basic alignment between parents and educators can help engage parents around self-directed learning. And yet, self-directed learning is a very different approach to schooling than most parents have experienced themselves. Effectively communicating with parents about *why* self-directed learning will lead to better college outcomes has been a challenge and intense focus for Summit in 2013-14.

### A New Type of School

For many parents, Summit's self-directed learning model looks quite different from their personal experiences with school. From students learning on computers to a de-emphasis of teacher lectures to assessments based on cognitive skills, multiple elements of Summit's model understandably feel new. For some parents, this divergence between Summit's model and their own experiences with school may be a good

thing. Like their children, some parents at Summit have been enthusiastic about self-directed learning from Day 1. But for other parents, the novelty of Summit's self-directed model raised immediate questions about its effectiveness. These questions were exacerbated by technical issues – the online dashboard that Summit built for parents to track their child's progress, for example, was initially hard to interpret and parents had difficulty knowing what was happening in school. Together, the newness of the model, the technical difficulties, and the struggles that some students initially experienced with self-directed learning raised significant concerns among the Summit parent community.

### Bringing Parents Onboard

In response, Summit took several approaches that, over time, have led to a greater degree of trust and partnership between parents and the schools. First, and most importantly, Summit launched an effort to get as many parents as possible to visit and experience the self-directed model themselves. They found that attending a class, participating in an interactive parent-teacher night, or simply spending time in the building

greatly allayed concerns about self-direction among parents.

Second, Summit focused on communication. As lifelong educators, Summit staff understood the value of parent communication and had redoubled early outreach efforts in anticipation of the new model. But they still underestimated how unfamiliar self-directed learning would feel for parents. Furthermore, while parents do want to know *what* changes are happening in a self-directed model, they particularly want to know *why* these changes are occurring and why a new approach to school will be more effective for their children. Articulating clearly the value of cognitive skills, noncognitive skills, and self-directed learning in general remains a priority for Summit.

## Supporting Your Child in Self-Directed Learning

As more and more parents had a chance to experience Summit's self-directed model, the conversation shifted to how parents should best support their children in this new learning environment. When Summit students come home from school they seldom have traditional homework – Summit dedicates an extra eight hours a week to Personalized Learning Time after school where students complete assignments and study for assessments. Instead of traditional homework, however, students will be thinking about projects that bring out cognitive skills. For many parents, this shift away from homework has changed how they relate to their children after school. In place of dinner table conversations about finishing assignments, parents, like teachers, have started asking questions about cognitive skills or what their children are learning through their projects. As with other aspects of parent involvement in self-directed learning, learning how to have these conversations has been a gradual process for parents, and has meant a new mindset for talking with their children about their progress in school.

# ADMINISTRATOR
# EXPERIENCE
## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

# ADMINISTRATOR EXPERIENCE

## OF SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

By driving toward a strongly-held vision while allowing the details of the approach to change, Summit has better been able to navigate the complexity of launching a new approach to learning across a diverse network of schools.

School and central office leaders have been responsible for sustaining the vision of self-directed learning. As self-directed learning evolved and inevitable challenges arose, this has required an adaptive mindset for leadership. Instead of approaching self-directed learning as a fixed model or destination, Summit's leaders saw it as a design principle and goal. When different schools in the network implemented self-directed learning in slightly different ways, Summit's leaders encouraged this variation while maintaining overall fidelity to the vision. Summit has also set up systems for teachers and leaders from different schools in the network to share positive experiences and learn from one another. By driving toward a strongly-held vision while allowing the details of the approach to change, Summit has better been able to navigate the complexity of launching a new approach to learning across a diverse network of schools.

### Self-Directed Learning As a Lens for Decisionmaking

As a result of the Khan Academy pilot, blended learning, and giving students greater agency over the past three years, Summit's leaders have come to see self-directed learning as a lens for making key decisions. For example, in designing how students interact with technology some schools have created algorithms that direct students to precise worksheets or activities at every point in the day. Summit considered this route of "instructor-directed" blended learning, yet ultimately chose to step back and create the space for *self*-directed blended learning. This decision has at times made for greater complexity and messiness as students learn how to learn, but Summit believes it will better help students acquire the skills to succeed in college and beyond.

1 : Create the environment for self-directed learning

2 : Don't panic

3 : Build supports and behaviors

## A Sequence for Leaders of Self-Directed Schools

In reflecting on 2013-14, school and central office leaders at Summit point to three key elements of successful leadership in a self-directed setting, which together form a sequence for Summit's evolution across the school year.

## 1 : Create the environment for self-directed learning

A supportive environment for self-directed learning rests on a shared belief that a new approach to school is needed. By the start of its self-directed learning journey, Summit had come to believe that while its high-touch, high-support school model was effective at getting students *to* college, the degree of supports was an impediment to getting students *through* college. As a result, Summit's faculty knew they needed a dramatically different learning environment for students – one that provided much more agency for students to learn how to learn independently. From this starting point, Summit's leadership began building the basic structures and processes to launch a self-directed learning model.

## 2 : Don't panic

When a subset of students, teachers, and parents each struggled with self-directed learning at the beginning of the school year, Summit's leaders were tempted to rush in and reinstate all the traditional supports. But they held back, and reminded themselves why Summit believed so strongly in self-directed learning. They also accepted that some initial confusion is part of a change process – even while working to improve the model.

## 3 : Build supports & behaviors

As students and adults gradually got used to the self-directed model, Summit administrators settled into the long-term work of helping students to build the skills of self-direction, teachers to become facilitators and coaches, and parents to learn how to support their children in a new environment. This often entailed building in new structures as well – for example, structures to help teachers shift their practice to focus on cognitive skills.

## Change Management is Key

As with any substantial change process, shifting to self-directed learning has necessitated careful attention to change management. In particular, Summit's leaders made consistent efforts at the beginning of the year to communicate the potential value of self-directed learning to parents and to teachers. In some instances Summit could have gone even further in these efforts – a lesson for the next school year. But the most important aspect of change management has been capturing success. With teachers, for example, seeing more and more of their students change their learning behaviors and start to progress even faster has been the most effective possible rational for self-direction. For Summit's leaders, finding ways to highlight these early signs of behavior change – whether through faculty conversations, cross-school practice sharing, or formative student data – have been critical to building buy-in and the culture to support self-direction.

# LESSONS LEARNED

Five lessons in particular stand out from Summit's first year of implementing a whole-school, self-directed learning model

**1**
- **Adults need to learn to let go...**
- For students to direct their own learning, teachers, parents, and school leaders must each step back and give them the space to do so. This shift is predicated on the belief that when students have the appropriate supports and tools to drive their own learning, they will do so successfully while developing the critical skills needed to succeed in college and a meaningful career.

**2**
- **...But also know when to**
- **step in and support.** Letting go does not mean that adults stop paying attention. Quite the opposite – some students will need intensive, tiered, and personalized supports to thrive in a self-directed environment. Furthermore, all students will benefit from timely interventions, coaching, and formative feedback to help them in their self-directed learning behaviors.

**3**
- **Self-direction challenges**
- **traditional notions of school.** For students, teachers, and parents alike, Summit's self-directed model looks quite different from what they have experienced before. This difference can be positive and

can ignite new excitement about learning. It also can also be challenging to un-learn previous assumptions about school.

**4**
- **Students need the skills to**
- **self-direct successfully.** Self-direction depends on both a set of dispositions and a series of learned behaviors and skills. Deliberate attention is needed to help students develop both the cognitive and noncognitive skills to understand what they need to learn and how to get there. This process can take time, and should be reinforced by frequent coaching and formative feedback.

**5**
- **Self-direction is not new,**
- **but technology can help us do it better.** Technology enables self-directed learning to be more accessible and effective for public schools. For Summit, technology has helped take longstanding values of personalization and self-direction and make them much more achievable. Still, while technology provides powerful tools, self-direction is also an intrinsic process that depends on relationships, culture, and internal motivations to succeed.

*For videos related to this case study, please visit www.fsg.org/selfdirectedlearning*